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Hypnerotomachia Joins the Perkins Library: Collecting to Support Persuasion in Architectural Design and History

Abstract

The acquisition of the *Hypnerotomachia* by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries aligned with collection development objectives established in the 1950s by Architecture Dean G. Holmes Perkins. In order to support the university's training in contemporary design for architecture and urban planning, Perkins built a collection of textual and graphic resources reflecting architectural theory and practice from the Renaissance through the twentieth century. Perkins was a modernist but expected students to acquire expertise in the whole of architectural history. The Perkins Library is made available in dedicated space within the Anne and Jerome Fisher Fine Arts Library, University of Pennsylvania.

Keywords

history and theory of architecture, architectural education, academic libraries, architecture librarianship, library collection development, library special collections

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Collection Development and Management | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments

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Hypnerotomachia joins the Perkins Library: Collecting to Support Persuasion in Architectural Design and History

William B. Keller

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For Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry

26 June 2013

G. Holmes Perkins, Dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Fine Arts from 1951 to 1971, and active to the age of ninety-nine, began our collection of the early monuments of architectural publishing. Today, it is available to an audience of designers and researchers drawn from the university community and beyond. The collection is integral to PennDesign's Ph.D. program in Architecture and we, as librarians, are honored to carry it forward.

Perkins was a modernist, working before and after World War II with Gropius and Hudnut at Harvard, but as a teacher expected his students to build and deploy expertise in the whole of architectural history, which he viewed as a continuum.¹ His commitment to the study of the built environment as an integrated whole became clear upon his appointment in 1951 as Fine Arts Dean by Penn's President Harold Stassen. Perkins hired faculty, including Lewis Mumford, who developed courses of study in city planning and landscape architecture that meshed effectively with the established program in architecture. The curricula Perkins crafted required library resources of high quality for architecture, city planning, landscape architecture, and for the developing program in urban design.

Perkins realized that Penn lacked many of the earlier monuments of architectural publishing that he had found at Harvard. These books, dating from the sixteenth century forward, provided the foundation for understanding the shaping of human environment.

For Perkins, the modernism of Le Corbusier and Gropius was part of a larger and older narrative. He wanted students to see how ideas could be traced. As an educator, Perkins intended that the graduates of his school enter the professions equipped to make humane environments for urban living. He was a believer in the process of urban renewal as it was framed in the 1950s. Yet he valued cities in their density and multiplicity of form and advocated the study of cities across time.²

In consolidating textual and graphic resources in architectural theory and history, Perkins's efforts recall the activities of a succession of distinguished American architect-scholars and library builders of earlier periods. For example, Ithiel Town, one of the first professional architects in the United States, intended that his library assist the design process not by supplying

examples for imitation but by offering the user the opportunity to improve architectural understanding and refine design skills through study. Perkins shared this view with respect to the library he gathered and developed.

The foundation of the collection is formed by the single great book of Vitruvius (*De Architectura Libri X*) in its Florence edition of 1513, together with the works of Alberti, Scamozzi, Serlio, Vignola, and Palladio. The Perkins Library holds several editions, abridgments, and translations of Vitruvius, including one of the first of the pocket editions, reduced in size for handy reference.

The author-architects of the Renaissance, beginning with Alberti in the middle of the fifteenth century, presented and interpreted Roman architectural theory. The first generations of architecture books established the elements of architectural practice. For example, the 1611 London edition of Serlio's *Booke of Architecture*, an English translation of part of the author's sixteenth-century treatise, inspired specific building programs in Europe. Perkins would have known the *Hypnerotomachia* and, if possibly impatient with the text, would have valued its marvelous view of the classical world.

With the acquisition of this book, we are now able to bring to the collection a kind of emotional counter to the rules-based treatise. Authors deploy texts and images to persuade, argue, and, in the case of the author-architects, establish and develop professional standing. James Gibbs's London church of St. Martin in the Fields, under construction between 1722 and 1726, featured prominently in Gibbs's own *Book of Architecture* of 1728. Gibbs had sought subscribers to make possible the preparation of the book's plates and texts — in effect, counting on titled men, artists, craftsmen, and even fellow architects to help him advertise his own architectural services. The *Book of Architecture* influenced buildings throughout the American colonies. Mount Pleasant, of 1761–62, situated in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, is a rectangular block with a pedimented central pavilion, analogous to designs in Gibbs. In that era, the engraved plate was a powerful transmitter of architectural form.

In the nineteenth century, increases in technological capabilities and market demand generated literature intended to support the architect's management of practice. At the same time, the question of the effect of architecture and environment on people's lives emerged in general discussion. The now subdivided field of architecture brought forth many of the books found today in the Perkins Library. Books on domestic architecture, addressed to the architect's potential client in the country, suburb, or city, are joined by clusters of publications on landscape or cemetery architecture, masonry construction, bridge engineering, and public building. A notable example is Orson Fowler's 1854 *Home for All; Or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building*.

The Perkins Library is rich in works dedicated to the philosophy and development of urban form in the twentieth century. Bruno Taut's *Auflösung der Städte* (1920) and Frank Lloyd Wright's *Broadacre City* (1943) differ in approach but share in questioning the viability of the city as it existed in the first half of the century.

Perkins wanted a contentious, experimentally minded faculty and argumentative but informed students. Meetings and juries saw, in his own words, each and every view challenged and as warmly defended. Such a training environment, Perkins thought, would best support the professional architect's dedication to creative design.³

The Perkins Library exists to generate the presentation and discussion of ideas in architecture. Students, working individually and collectively, consider, accept, modify, and refute these ideas. The Perkins Library is a place, situated within our building designed by Frank Furness, the building that Perkins, through his own powers of persuasion, protected against demolition in the 1950s. For Penn today, the Perkins Library is also a mission, calling on us to find new ways to extend and strengthen its reach.

The G. Holmes Perkins Books and Archives Fund, managed jointly by PennDesign and the Penn Libraries, enabled the purchase of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* in the 1545 edition. We thank Dean Marilyn Jordan Taylor, and Vice Provost and Director of Libraries Carton Rogers, for their support of this acquisition, and the fund's committee chair, Professor John Dixon Hunt, for seizing the opportunity. We recognize as well PennDesign's Architectural Archives, founded by Perkins as a spectacular complement to the books he brought together.

Notes

1 G. Holmes Perkins, interview by William B. Keller, September 20, 1999; Perkins, "Course Notebook ARCH 516, 1975," G. Holmes Perkins Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania.

2 Perkins, "The Architect and the City," in *The Architect and the City; Papers from the AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar, Cranbrook Academy of Art, June 11–22, 1962*, ed. Marcus Whiffen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 1–12.

3 Perkins, interview by William B. Keller, September 20, 1999.